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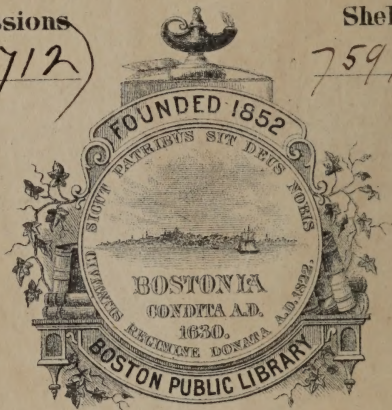
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AN
AMERICAN TRACT
FOR
THE TIMES.

AN
AMERICAN TRACT

FOR
THE TIMES:

BEING
AN HUMBLE BUT EARNEST PLEA

IN BEHALF OF
COMMON SENSE.

BY A FORMER MEMBER OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF CAMBRIDGE.



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TRACT FOR THE TIMES.

EVERY person of an observing and reflecting turn will agree with me, that plain common sense is going out of fashion, and that there is fast coming into vogue a sort of transcendental sense, which leads men to despise the track to knowledge, wealth, or honor, which their fathers travelled, and to set at naught universal experience in their endeavors to know all there is to be known, to get all there is to be gotten, either of riches or reputation, without severe mental discipline, and without honest, cautious, straight-forward effort.

Those strange stories and whimsical rhymes, which delighted the children of

many a by-gone generation, are not, perhaps, to be wished back again; but it is nevertheless true that the popular attempts to put nothing into the childish mind, but superfine taste and nonpareil morality, do by no means supply their place in interesting the youthful fancy or in laying a foundation for good sense. The wire-drawn morality of most story books is one of the most insipid of all things; — springing generally from a half-enlightened head and an unenlightened heart, it is strained and unnatural, and can have no other legitimate influence upon minds drawn into contact with it, than to cause intellectual confusion, and to stifle the natural play of the feelings. It requires no great strength of imagination, very little judgment, and an imperfect acquaintance only with human nature, to make volumes of moral tales, full of exquisite illustration and still more exquisite reflection, whose aim and effect shall be to make every little child a paragon of artificial propriety, educated out of all naturalness of feeling, and educated into the most refined, correct, and unexceptionable ways of thinking, speaking, and acting.

Nor are the youngest minds alone subjected to the influence of crude books. It is hardly to be supposed that a taste, formed in very early life by such books as I have described, would very soon crave works of a more solid character. Nor if they should desire such, are they very likely to be gratified; for, after the child's head has been well crammed with moralizing essays adapted to infant minds, another order of books is brought on, having, however, the same character and the same tendency. And in this way is supported what would otherwise fall away, by reason of its perfect emptiness, a shallow, trashy literature, produced without the aid of brains, and not demanding the exercise of them in the reader, except in trying to find a very little sense where there is none.

But, it may be objected, "you would then give strong meat to young minds, before they have taken milk enough." I plead not guilty. I have no greater affection for lisping, walking encyclopedias, than for full-grown idiots. The attempt to make children such is only another phase of the same

pernicious plan of education, and grows out of it. Nay, though apparently extremes, the two modes are, at bottom, identical ; for, notwithstanding the popular notions to the contrary, a young mind cannot know everything, and, where this is endeavored, there must necessarily be little else than half-formed ideas about a great many subjects, — and that is the very thing to be deprecated.

The greater part of the popular reading-books, instead of being compiled from the writings of men who had clear heads, and wrote simply and sensibly, are, with some exceptions, made up of indigestible pieces in prose and rhyme. This is not intended perhaps ; but it is the carrying out of a strange notion, that shallow, half-formed thoughts, expressed in a corresponding manner, form the easiest style of composition, and are best adapted to be set before youthful minds ; whereas the profoundest ideas are often the simplest, and these, if not perfectly comprehended by a child, (though this is the case much oftener than some people think,) will at least not puzzle

the brain with useless effort. The writings of no men are so hard to understand as of those, who, for their lives, cannot say a thing and have it done with, but must needs go about a great way generalizing, and at last begin to approach cautiously the matter in hand, and even then make such a flourishing of trumpets, that one can have no patience with them.

The best reading-book for schools is the Holy Bible ; and it is a subject of real regret, that the wickedness of any men should so far prevail in the matter of elementary instruction, that the best book, on which the young or the old can exercise their powers, should be superseded by almost anything else, provided it have the writer's or the compiler's word for it, that it is suitable for children. There is enough in the Bible to excite the highest thoughts of the greatest minds, and enough that is applicable to the meanest capacity. It is a mistake that children cannot understand this book well enough to be deeply interested in it. If those passages, which are the best suited for them, were selected as reading passages,

(and no one, who is as familiar with the inspired pages, as every school-teacher ought to be, will ever be at a loss to find such,) then not only would the taste of the scholar be improved by an early acquaintance with this best of all models, but a good foundation would be laid also for sensible piety and sobriety of disposition.

To the system of mental training now in vogue must be attributed, in a great measure, that contemptible worshipping of the German mind, which is so fashionable now-a-days. It is this which has prepared so good a soil for that awkward, disjointed, heathenish system, known commonly by the name of Transcendentalism.

A friend of mine, who, though loving many things in German literature, exercises discrimination in his attachment, once told me, that Transcendentalism was nothing but the ghost of Plato, walking about in moonlight. As to the ghost and the moonshine, I agree with him perfectly ; but I believe that its origin dates farther back than Plato. It is the oldest system of so called philosophy which the world knows. It was first preached

in the garden of Eden. Satan, who, in the form of a Serpent, beguiled the inhabitants of that holy place by assuring them, that although they should eat of the forbidden tree, and thus disobey the express injunction of the Creator, they should not die, but become as gods, knowing good and evil, was the first and the most sensible Transcendentalist, of whom there is any record. What he said to our first parents is essentially the same with what is proclaimed, though not so forcibly, by many at the present day. The doctrine is now promulgated, that human reason is the great standard of truth, and it is more than hinted, that we do foolishly to believe what we cannot fully comprehend. We are invited to approach the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and to partake of its fruit, nothing doubting that we shall derive much sustenance from it, that we shall thus be enabled to solve all mysteries, (though, it may be, by involving them in greater,) and that we shall be as gods, in our own eyes, at least. *Any one may become a true Christ*, says the modern Transcendentalist. *Ye shall be as gods*

was the language of the old one. The knowledge of which Satan spoke was essentially the same with what is called in these days "Rationalism."

There are some things connected with Transcendentalism, which are unquestionably true ; but when it despoils Revelation of all that makes it a revelation, when it asserts that all the inspiration that can be conceived of is natural to depraved human nature ; when it holds forth the impious declaration, that all men are in the highest sense Sons of God, when it connects itself with all that is radical and destructive in theory, and under the pretence of looking at everything in a rational manner, adopts the most unreasonable dogmas and the most fantastical notions — it shows the lineaments of the FATHER OF LIES, though transformed, in part, into an Angel of Light.

Were I called upon to say what I think to be the chief characteristic of the present age, I should have little fear of contradiction in pronouncing it to be a want of thoughtfulness. There is, indeed, a sort of

thinking,* which is fashionable among certain classes, an excitement of the mind with more play of the fancy, than exercise of the judgment, which, by the help of an artful phraseology, passes with the undiscerning for something very philosophical and profound. But a mind moderately discriminative can easily distinguish between this affected use of high-sounding and strange words, put together in uncouth and odd sentences, from the plain, simple, unpretending manner, in which real thoughtfulness is always clothed. The man, who is honestly engaged about ideas, is so far careful of the way in which he expresses himself, that he may be perspicuous ; if he desires to present his thoughts

* I must beg pardon of the fashionable critic for using this and its cognate words. — I am aware that the signs of things that are growing obsolete may sound strangely ; but since there may be some who will see this discourse, that recollect the meaning usually attached to such words as, *think, thinking, thought, &c.*, I am induced, out of respect to them, to retain these expressions a while longer, until the tone of public opinion becomes too strong to tolerate them.

in an agreeable manner, he will see to it, that his medium of communication *be clear as well as beautiful*; but the mere pretender, who has but few ideas, and those imperfectly developed, must needs make the most of them, and, if endowed by nature with a polite bearing and an I-know-all-about-it demeanor, may, perchance, so influence some silly men and silly women, as to be thought by them a veteran philosopher, when, in fact, he has great need to unlearn his pedantic habits, and to find out, by a little wholesome and well-directed effort, what thinking means.

This actual want of thoughtfulness, connected as it is with the apparent consciousness in the minds of those, who are the subjects of it, of being very thoughtful, results, in a great measure, from attempts to make those pursuits popular, which, from their nature, cannot, in their purity, be so. What, therefore, these pursuits lack in themselves of popularity, is endeavored to be made up in a superinduced interest, entirely foreign to them, which may so disguise their character, that many persons may fancy they

are absorbed in the contemplation of the abstrusest matters, when, in truth, they are only swallowing the sugared accompaniments with which these abstruse matters, well diluted for their infantile palates, are recommended to them.

Philosophy, in its purity, can never be a popular study, and especially must it fail of becoming so, among a people who are hurrying this way and that, intent on anything else than reflection upon their intellectual and moral nature. The philosopher, and the man who rightly appreciates the labors of the philosopher, must live apart from the noisy strife of the world, and must count those the happiest moments, with which he can be blessed, while tabernacled in the body, when all external things exert an influence upon his spirit so attempered by meditative habits, that he may look down into the depths of his soul in perfect calmness, undisturbed by rough blasts and boisterous noises; and still more blessed, if a Christian philosopher; for then, he may see in those serene depths the beautiful reflec-

tion of a light from Heaven that irradiates the whole spiritual nature ; whereas the flitting glimpses of mere human wisdom bestow only a transient illumination, which wakes up what it cannot satisfy in the bosom of the thoughtful man, a craving after deeper knowledge of himself, and that wondrous machine for thought and feeling placed within him.

How strange a thing, then, it is to suppose that the reflections, which spring up in the mind of the man thus given to quiet and solitary contemplation, should find a ready passage with all the glittering lumber of the day through the great thoroughfare of worldly passion, and be greeted with a smile of approbation from the thoughtless and the gay ; whilst, too, the philosopher is all the while regarded as no other than a ladies' man, who must put on an affable and easy grace, and talk as flippantly of all the petty bubbles of the hour as the veriest trifler, who loves better the brilliancy of the drawing-room than the retirement of the scholar's chamber ! No, the man of real

thoughtfulness will scorn to make himself a mere fashionable quibbler ; he will desire, indeed, the company of kindred spirits ; but if he cannot have these, will prefer to live out his days in utter loneliness, than to be dragged along through the hurly-burly of factitious life, a showman of pretty baubles to the gaping multitude.

Away, then, with these efforts to reduce the noblest sciences and the highest themes, on which the human mind can exert itself, to the comprehension of those who care not to learn, if intellectual toil is the condition of learning. How much better to preserve all these noble objects of study and thought in their native majesty and grace, and, by gentle means, to lead up to them the willing and patient soul, than to bring them down from their high seat, and, putting upon them the mean attire of every-day life, to present them thus despoiled of all their grandeur to the heedless understandings of the crowd.

If it were the destiny of every man, that he must give over toiling after wisdom,

when the days of youth are passed, there might seem to be some reason for seeking to convey into the youthful mind a general knowledge of the sciences; but, when life lies all before us, and that a time too short to fathom the depths of a single science, how preposterous the notion, that minds as yet undisciplined to habits of thinking should comprehend a tithe of all which their well-meaning but mistaken guardians would force into them, till the very brain becomes clogged in its movements, and loses its elasticity.

The tendency of these unnatural efforts to make a short cut to knowledge, is to beget a certain radicalism of sentiment, which is as inconsistent with individual progress in wisdom and virtue, as it is with civil subordination. The man who is educated to feel, that he only needs to spend a few leisure hours to get a complete acquaintance with any possible object of human inquiry, will naturally cherish a disposition to underrate the mighty ones of the earth, who have spent years at the

threshold of what he thinks to see through at a glance; and being filled with self-conceit at the fancied extent of his powers, will become more inclined to question authority not only of men, but Supreme Authority itself; and mistaking his own whims for the deductions of reason, will be tempted as far as in him lies to remove the ancient landmarks, and bring down all things and all persons to one dead level, where, however, he shall distinguish himself by superior hardihood and radicalism.

Another evil, and one closely allied to that last mentioned, is the love of innovation and change, that very naturally springs from the unsettled state of the mind, induced by weak and capricious exercises. No one can appreciate the treasured wisdom of ages, who thinks to become familiar with them in a few desultory hours, — and he will be ever prone to devise some new thing, mistaking that for originality of mind which is only the fitful flashings of a soul just beginning to wake up. Experience, if allowed to give her testimony, would

quickly look down all these endeavors of undisciplined intellects after something new and uncommon ; but it so happens that experience is one of those things against which the popular clamor seems to be raised, as if, indeed, it were some great enemy to enterprise and spirited action, and could have no other influence than to damp resolution and impede philosophical inquiry.

There is another evil also to be apprehended from the prevalent system of crowding the human mind with everything that is to be learned, instead of teaching it to think by presenting to it a few but important points, — that is insanity. I will not attempt proving this by metaphysical reasoning ; I leave it to be decided by common sense, whether a fine mind, which, under judicious management in respect to the subjects, in which it is endeavored to interest it, might gradually attain a high and firm position, is not very likely to have its just balance lost by being subjected to the fetters of a mode of instruction, which seeks

to burden the memory with facts, rather than to establish the judgment ; to inspire a thirst for mere information, instead of a thoughtful spirit, moving slowly at first, and exerting itself upon little things, but growing stronger and stronger every hour, and slowly but surely laying a substantial basis for widely extended knowledge.

In conclusion, the true way to secure true manliness of disposition, and to preserve the mind from the sickly influence of a superficial system of education, is, first of all things, to have the mind thoroughly imbued with the truths of Revelation, and to take hold in right good earnest of what great minds have spoken for the benefit of the world ; and if, at first, it ill suits with any one to bind himself to the reading and studying of what requires careful thought and attention, let him not be discouraged, but keep on perseveringly in his course, and by and by it will so happen that those very works, which seemed so distasteful to him at the outset, will become so invigorating and refreshing to his spirit,

that he can hardly, if he would, restrain himself from reading them over and over again ; for, whatever is truly excellent, has generally so modest and easy an air about it as not to impress very powerfully at first, but grows on acquaintance ; and a higher praise cannot be given of any work of art, than that its merit does not haughtily appear all at once to the observing crowd, but unfolds itself gradually.

Were the popular taste to become directed to what is sound and sober in literature and science, what a grateful spectacle would it be to all lovers of sense to see how the saucy wits, who pretend, without any other reason than the use of hard words, to great profundity of learning and reflection, would draw in their impudent faces from the public gaze, and be shamed either into silence or into a more simple demeanor ; either going back into their native and proper obscurity with feelings of wholesome mortification, or, if they must speak, frankly acknowledging, that they had not so much depth of thought as they supposed

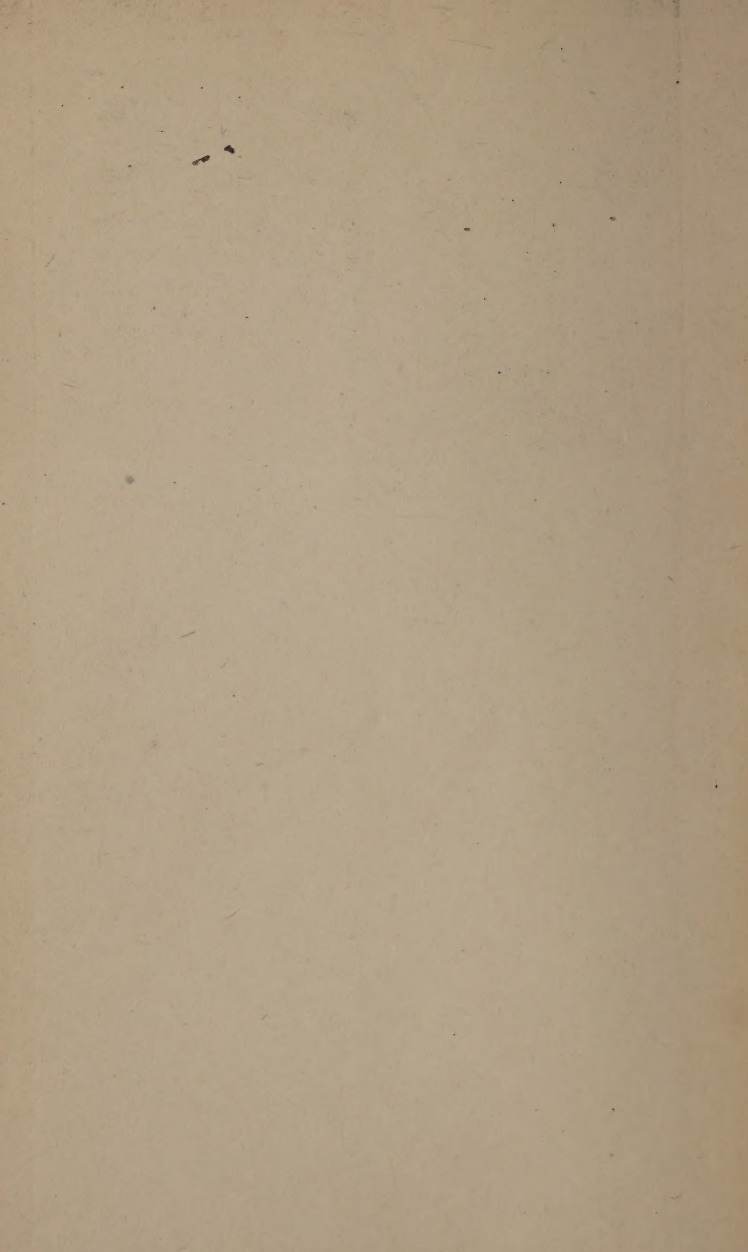
they had, and after a severe course of discipline, reforming their insolent habits, and beginning to talk like men who know the difference between words and ideas !

And let it not be the farthest from the sensible man to strive to attain excellency in his mother tongue, and to preserve, so far as he may, the national characteristics. He does a poor service for his countrymen who would engraft upon their intellectual nature a disposition which does not consist well with it. For instance, there are persons who act as if they thought they could not be better employed than in seeking to engraft upon the sound stock of the sober, sensible, Anglican intellect, the fantastic eccentricities of the present German mind.

It is indeed true, that the noble languages of antiquity are well calculated to strengthen the natural good sense which distinguishes those who speak the English language from all the rest of the world. They are strong meat, whereas many of the literary productions of certain modern languages are like sweetmeats, that do very well as a dessert

after heartier sustenance, but which, if made the only food, soon disgust, and are very apt to occasion that most uncomfortable of mortal ailments, — mental dyspepsia.

Thus do I close this tract. Though I can hardly hope that anything here said will have great weight, I should yet be right glad that it had any, the least influence, in persuading a single person to look with a more discriminating eye upon the literature of the present day, with its nine-penny novels and countless magazines, and to seek instruction and enjoyment in the writings of those master-minds that have adorned our noble language, in the monuments of Grecian and Roman genius, and especially in that work of Inspiration which in its simple majesty has, for ages, put to shame the sneers of the profane and the doubts of the pedantic.



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